

## **A Qualitative Inquiry into the formation of Generational Cohorts: a Case of an Emerging Market**

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### **Abstract**

This study use sociological theories of generations to identify generational cohorts for market segmentation. These theories are predominantly used in the West, hence little is known about their relevance in emerging markets, such as Malaysia. Past studies have mostly borrowed cohort labels from that of the U.S. sources, and assumed that their characteristics can be construed in the Malaysian context. Given the exploratory nature of the study, a qualitative approach by means of personal interview was conducted to identify the actual cohorts in Sarawak, a state in Malaysia. Specifically, major societal and historical events that Sarawakians could overtly recall due to their attachment to them during formative years were elicited. Accordingly forty-eight interviews were recorded, transcribed and content-analysed. Five cohorts were identified, and they were different from that of the U.S. sources. They were subsequently labelled as Neoteric-inheritors, Prospective-pursuers, Social-strivers, Idealistic-strugglers and Battling-lifers based on their collective experience of the events. The results

show the relevance of theories of generations for market segmentation in emerging market.

**Keywords:** sociology, marketing, generational cohort, qualitative.

## **Introduction**

The sociological concept concerning generation and its impact on society has long been discussed in various disciplines, especially in the West (Dwyer, 2009; Glenn, 2005). Specifically, generation study has increasingly gained its relevance in marketing due to its profound implication on consumer behaviour (Schewe and Meredith, 2004). Studies have shown positive prospects of generational cohort in developing marketing strategies and in understanding consumers (Moore and Carpenter, 2008; Motta and Schewe, 2008). Generation descriptions such as Leading-edge Boomers, Trailing-edge Boomers, Generations X and Y are time and again associated with marketing opportunities and market segmentation (Noble and Schewe, 2003; Schewe and Noble, 2000). Despite originating from sociology, understanding generation has become an innovative basis for marketers and managers alike to communicate with and serve consumers effectively (Mittal *et al.*, 2008). As generation is a lifelong process, it makes the understanding of their characteristics and the prediction of their future behaviour more credible (Holbrook and Schindler, 1994).

## **Literature review**

### **Definition of Generational Cohort**

Generational cohort is defined as a group of individuals who are born during the same time period and who experience similar societal and historical events during their late adolescent and early adulthood years (Rogler, 2002). As such it goes beyond what age alone can divulge because it explores the life journey of individuals through their coming-of-age years (Motta and Schewe, 2008; Smola and Sutton, 2002). They experience the same external events at about the same point in their human development (Edmunds and Turner, 2005), be it political, economic, social or technological event (Noble and Schewe, 2003). Due to its cataclysmic impact on people, individuals in the same generational cohorts tend to think and act differently from those born in other time spans (Gursoy *et al.*, 2008).